

Chapter 1

The Sickness

AIDS is a small word for a big sickness. It is more terrible than a crazy lion or a *maama* hyena with babies in her belly. HIV/AIDS kills many people in our village.

My *maama wange* has AIDS and I am afraid she will die. Nobody calls her sickness AIDS—not when they are talking to us. But they talk at the waterhole about “bad people’s sickness”. But Maama is not bad. Maama tells us how zebras got their stripes, and she dances with us. Before she was sick, she brought water for our family and grew plantains to feed us.



Hope for Hanna

Sometimes I tell myself Maama can't have AIDS because the sickness only happens to bad people. But I know in my heart this is not true. Mr Nantonga was a good person. He was our teacher and everybody loved him but he got HIV/AIDS and died. Then his wife got sick and died, too.

Mr and Mrs Lokorimoe in our village looked after twelve children that nobody else in the village would take. Mrs Lokorimoe had a bad accident one day and went to hospital to get new blood. Then she got sick. She says the new blood from the hospital gave her HIV/AIDS but nobody believes her. No—HIV/AIDS does not just happen to bad people. Good people get it too! Good people like Maama.



Hope for Hanna

There is no money in the village for medicine. Many grown-ups have the sickness. Most children are looked after by their *jjajja* because their parents have died.

With no medicine, Maama gets sicker. She is thin and coughs a lot.

One morning we wake up and Taata has gone. He has taken his goatskin drum and our chicken.

Maama curses him. She says, "I can't believe he would take food from his own children."

"Don't worry," I say. "I will look after everything, now. I am eleven—nearly full-grown."

Maama smiles. "You are my big girl, Hanna," she says. "I will need you more than ever."

When I walk down the street, I hear Mrs Obote, the biggest gossip in our village, telling Mrs Koboga, the new school teacher, that Taata left because Maama had AIDS and he didn't want to catch it from her.

My little sisters, Kissa, Namona and Zesiro, are too young to know such things. They play and laugh. They use sticks to draw pictures on the floor of our hut.

There is no time for school now as I must look after my family. Maama needs me at home to watch my sisters and keep them safe. I try to make Maama happy. Some days when she is